

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE CHARACTER EDUCATION STRENGTHENING PROGRAM AT STATE JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL 4 BINJAI, NORTH SUMATRA

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ABSTRACT

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This study investigates the implementation of the Character Education Strengthening Program at State Junior High School 4 Binjai, Indonesia. The research aims to analyze how the principles of organization, interpretation, and application interact to support the effectiveness of the program in shaping students' moral and social behavior. Using a qualitative descriptive design, data were collected through observations, in-depth interviews, and document analysis involving teachers, students, and school administrators.

The findings reveal that the success of the program depends on the coherent integration of structural, pedagogical, and behavioral dimensions. The organizational framework provides clear coordination and shared responsibility among school stakeholders, while teachers play a central role in interpreting character values into daily educational practices. The consistent application of the five core values—religiosity, nationalism, independence, cooperation, and integrity—has fostered a positive school culture and improved students' moral awareness. Furthermore, collaboration among the school, parents, and the community enhances the sustainability of the program. The study concludes that character education becomes effective when it is implemented as a holistic moral ecosystem rather than as a stand-alone policy. The findings emphasize the importance of leadership, teacher capacity, and community participation in cultivating ethical, disciplined, and socially responsible youth. This research contributes to the broader discourse on education reform and provides strategic insights for policymakers seeking to strengthen character-based learning across schools in Indonesia.

1. INTRODUCTION

Youth represents the fundamental human capital and future asset of every nation. Adolescence is a critical developmental stage that determines the formation of values, identity, and civic responsibility in individuals. However, in recent decades, the moral landscape of youth in Indonesia has been increasingly challenged by the growing prevalence of juvenile delinquency, a social pathology that manifests through violence, drug abuse, sexual misconduct, and other forms of deviant behavior (Sumara, 2017). Kartono (2005) conceptualizes juvenile delinquency as a social pathological symptom arising from social neglect, in which adolescents fail to internalize positive values due to weak family structures, a lack of role models, and minimal social supervision. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), approximately 20% of the world's population consists of adolescents aged 10–20 years, highlighting the importance of this developmental stage as a global concern in human resource development.

In the Indonesian context, juvenile delinquency has emerged as a national issue that concerns parents, educators, and policymakers. Statistical data from the Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS) reveal that cases of juvenile delinquency in Indonesia increased from 6,325 cases in 2013 to 7,762 cases in 2015, representing an annual increase of 10.7%. These

cases include various forms of antisocial behavior such as theft, physical assault, substance abuse, and risky sexual behavior among adolescents aged 15–24 years. Psychosocial research suggests that this phenomenon is rooted in both internal factors, such as emotional immaturity and weak moral reasoning, and external factors, including peer influence, digital culture, and family neglect. This aligns with the view that adolescents are highly impressionable and easily influenced by the norms prevailing within their social environments.

The problem of moral degradation among adolescents can also be observed at the local level, particularly in Binjai City, North Sumatra, which has experienced several concerning cases of youth delinquency. One prominent case involved a 20-year-old who burned down his parents' house after being denied money, while another incident involved a youth murdering an online motorcycle taxi driver to obtain money for gambling. Even within educational institutions, signs of moral decline persist. A case of bullying at State Junior High School 4 Binjai, where a group of students physically assaulted a peer, went viral on social media, demonstrating the severity of moral erosion among school-aged youth. Such incidents indicate that the moral crisis among youth is not limited to domestic or public spaces but has also permeated

schools-institutions that are expected to serve as primary agents of moral and character formation.

The Indonesian government has recognized this growing moral concern and responded through Presidential Regulation No. 87 of 2017 concerning the *Penguatan Pendidikan Karakter* (Character Education Strengthening or PPK) program. The regulation defines PPK as an educational movement under the responsibility of formal education institutions aimed at reinforcing character values through the harmonization of *olah hati* (ethics), *olah rasa* (aesthetics), *olah pikir* (literacy), and *olah raga* (kinesthetics). This initiative is part of the National Movement for Mental Revolution (*Gerakan Nasional Revolusi Mental* – GNRM), which emphasizes collaboration among schools, families, and communities. The legal foundation of character education is further supported by Article 3 of the National Education System Law (Law No. 20 of 2003), which states that the purpose of national education is to develop students' potential to become faithful, pious, and morally upright citizens who are knowledgeable, creative, independent, and responsible.

The urgency of character education in Indonesia lies not only in its preventive function against juvenile delinquency but also in its developmental role in shaping the "Golden Generation of 2045," a generation envisioned to embody Pancasila values and national resilience (Wibowo, 2013). Character education serves as the moral compass of the educational process, complementing cognitive and technical competencies with ethical and emotional intelligence. Hasanah (2010) asserts that weak moral character is a key factor driving adolescents toward deviant behavior. Thus, integrating character education into the national curriculum has become a strategic necessity rather than merely a pedagogical option.

Empirical studies have explored various approaches to the implementation of character education in Indonesian schools. For example, Ayu Putri Purnama (2018) found that the implementation of PPK in Senior High School 14 Bandar Lampung effectively shaped students' social behavior through the integration of values-based learning. Meanwhile, Dian Dwi Saputro (2018) identified that successful character education requires structured stages of planning, implementation, and evaluation. Wahyu Sri Wilujeng (2016) observed that at Elementary School Ummu Aiman Lampung, the program was implemented through religious and cultural activities such as *doa bersama*, *sholat dhuha*, *PHBI* (Islamic holiday celebrations), and *Pesantren Kilat*. However, these studies largely focus on primary or senior secondary schools in urban settings and overlook the contextual challenges faced by junior secondary schools, particularly those located in semi-urban areas such as Binjai.

Building upon these gaps, this study proposes a contextual examination of the implementation of the Character Education Strengthening Program (PPK) at State Junior High School 4 Binjai, North Sumatra. The novelty of this research lies in its focus on the implementation dimension-specifically, how organizational structures, teacher commitment, and local socio-cultural factors influence the translation of PPK policies into everyday school practices. Unlike prior studies that emphasize curriculum design or activity-based programs, this research explores how character education is operationalized at the institutional level and the extent to which it addresses behavioral issues among students. This study adopts Charles O. Jones's implementation framework,

which emphasizes the roles of organization, interpretation, and application as key mechanisms in effectively implementing public programs within schools.

Furthermore, this research situates the implementation of PPK within a broader discussion of governance and public administration, recognizing education policy as a public program whose success depends on intersectoral coordination among schools, government institutions, and communities. The implementation process requires effective communication, adequate resources, and consistent supervision to ensure that character-building initiatives move beyond symbolic programs and become a sustained cultural transformation within schools.

Therefore, this study aims to describe and analyze the implementation of the Character Education Strengthening Program (PPK) at State Junior High School 4 Binjai, North Sumatra. Specifically, it seeks to identify how the school interprets, organizes, and applies the principles of PPK in daily activities, as well as to examine the supporting and inhibiting factors that influence its implementation. The findings are expected to contribute to both theoretical and practical understandings of how public policy in education can effectively foster moral development among adolescents, thereby offering a model for strengthening character education in similar educational settings across Indonesia.

2. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design aimed at providing a comprehensive understanding of the empirical realities surrounding the implementation of the Character Education Strengthening Program (*Penguatan Pendidikan Karakter* or PPK) at the junior high school level. The qualitative descriptive approach was chosen because it enables researchers to explore social phenomena in their natural settings and to capture participants' verbal expressions, behaviors, and actions in detail. According to Bogdan and Taylor (2001:3), qualitative research is a research procedure that produces descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words from individuals and observable behavior. Similarly, Moleong (2001:6) explains that qualitative data consist primarily of words and images rather than numerical measurements, making this approach appropriate for examining social situations that require contextual interpretation rather than statistical analysis. Through this method, the researcher sought to describe, interpret, and analyze the implementation of the character education program based on empirical evidence obtained from the field.

The research was conducted at State Junior High School 4 Binjai, located on Bejomuna Street No. 66, Timbang Langkat, East Binjai District, Binjai City, North Sumatra. This location was selected because the school had previously been associated with several cases of student misbehavior, including bullying incidents that attracted public attention. Such circumstances made the school a relevant and strategic setting for examining how character education programs are implemented within an authentic educational context. The study involved **12 informants**, consisting of **the school principal (1 person), vice principals (2 persons), teachers (5 persons), administrative staff (1 person), and students (3 persons)**. These informants were selected through a purposive sampling technique. According to Sukandarumidi (2002:65), an informant is any individual, institution, or organization capable of providing information relevant to the

phenomenon being studied. The purposive sampling method allows researchers to select participants based on specific criteria related to the research objectives. In this study, the selected informants were individuals who possessed direct knowledge and experience regarding the implementation of the PPK program at the school.

The data in this research consisted of both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were obtained directly from informants through interviews, observations, and documentation. Arikunto (2010:22) explains that primary data include verbal expressions, actions, and behaviors collected directly from reliable sources, which in this study included teachers, staff members, and students of State Junior High School 4 Binjai. Meanwhile, secondary data were collected from relevant documents such as institutional archives, official reports, government regulations, and previous academic studies related to character education and policy implementation. These secondary sources were used to complement and contextualize the primary findings, thereby strengthening the validity of the research interpretation.

Data collection was conducted using three main techniques: interviews, observation, and documentation. Interviews were carried out to obtain in-depth information through direct dialogue between the researcher and the informants. Nazir (2003:193–194) defines interviews as a process of gathering information through structured or semi-structured question-and-answer interactions between the interviewer and respondents using an interview guide. Through this method, the researcher explored how school stakeholders understood and implemented the principles of character education in daily learning activities.

Observations were conducted to capture naturally occurring behaviors and interactions within the school environment. Arikunto (2006:124) explains that observation involves systematic and direct engagement with the research site to record activities or events relevant to the research objectives. Through observation, the researcher examined classroom interactions, extracurricular activities, and daily communication patterns that reflected the implementation of PPK values. Documentation was used to collect written records, photographs, and institutional materials related to the research topic. Sugiyono (2012:240) describes documentation as a data collection method that utilizes written and visual materials obtained from the research site or other credible sources. The use of these three techniques enabled methodological triangulation and enhanced the comprehensiveness of the collected data.

The data analysis process followed a qualitative analytical approach that began simultaneously with data collection. The analysis involved organizing the collected data, identifying recurring patterns, and interpreting the meanings embedded within them. Usman and Akbar (2009:84) explain that data analysis refers to the process of organizing and categorizing data into patterns or themes so that they can be meaningfully interpreted. In this study, the data analysis procedure consisted of three interrelated stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. During the data reduction stage, the researcher summarized and focused on essential information related to the implementation of the PPK program while filtering out less relevant data. This process helped simplify the dataset and clarify important patterns. In the data display stage, the information was organized into descriptive narratives supported by tables, field notes, and

thematic categorizations to illustrate relationships among the findings. The final stage involved drawing and verifying conclusions. Preliminary interpretations were continuously compared with additional data collected from the field to ensure their accuracy and consistency. Conclusions were refined until they were supported by sufficient empirical evidence and reflected the actual conditions observed in the research setting.

Throughout the research process, triangulation-through the combination of interviews, observations, and documentation-was applied to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. The qualitative descriptive design provided flexibility for the researcher to explore the contextual and human dimensions of policy implementation while maintaining analytical rigor. Overall, this methodological approach enabled a comprehensive understanding of how the Character Education Strengthening Program (PPK) was implemented at State Junior High School 4 Binjai, how school stakeholders interpreted and applied the program, and what supporting and inhibiting factors influenced its effectiveness in shaping students' moral and social character.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The implementation of the Character Education Strengthening Program at State Junior High School 4 Binjai reflects a systematic process that integrates organizational management, interpretive clarity, and practical application. The program aims to cultivate the core values of religiosity, nationalism, independence, cooperation, and integrity among students. The findings of this study are analyzed through three main dimensions-organization, interpretation, and application-as proposed by Charles O. Jones, who argues that these dimensions constitute the pillars of successful policy implementation.

Organizational Structure in the Implementation of Character Education

The first indicator, organization, serves as the administrative and managerial backbone of the program. A well-defined organizational system ensures that the objectives of the PPK program are systematically integrated into every dimension of school activities. The organizational structure at State Junior High School 4 Binjai reflects a coordinated system involving leadership, management, and participatory collaboration.

At the institutional level, the principal functions as the policy leader who formulates and supervises the vision, mission, and character-based objectives of the school. The vice principals are responsible for specific domains such as curriculum, facilities, and student affairs, each ensuring that character values are embedded within their respective operational areas. Teachers, as the primary implementers of the program, are responsible for integrating moral instruction into classroom teaching and extracurricular activities. Meanwhile, administrative staff and school committees provide logistical and communication support.

This organizational arrangement is consistent with Maryuni's (2016) argument that effective organizational frameworks enable the optimal utilization of human and material resources. The distribution of authority and accountability across different units at State Junior High School 4 Binjai promotes transparency and coordination between leadership and operational actors. The structure also reflects a participatory model in which collaboration with

school committees, parents, and the local community helps ensure the sustainability of the program.

The school's organizational readiness is evident not only in the distribution of responsibilities but also in its ability to mobilize resources. Human resources are strategically assigned based on competencies and functional roles. Teachers are encouraged to act as moral role models, counselors, and motivators. Staff members are responsible for maintaining school facilities, ensuring environmental cleanliness, and managing administrative support, all of which indirectly contribute to the development of a disciplined and responsible school culture.

Financial and infrastructural arrangements further strengthen organizational stability. The school allocates a portion of its budget to support character-building initiatives such as extracurricular clubs, environmental programs, and literacy development. This approach reflects Ponto's (2016) assertion that resource availability is a critical factor in effective program implementation. Overall, the organizational system at State Junior High School 4 Binjai demonstrates strong leadership, functional collaboration, and an adequate logistical foundation that allows the PPK program to operate consistently and effectively.

In summary, the school's organizational structure embodies the principle that educational management is not only concerned with academic administration but also with creating an ecosystem that nurtures moral and civic development. The alignment between leadership, institutional structure, and shared values has become a key strength in achieving the objectives of the Character Education Strengthening Program.

Interpretation of the Character Education Strengthening Program

The second indicator, interpretation, refers to the process of translating policy guidelines into operational and understandable actions. According to Jones (1994:320), interpretation represents the stage in which policy directives are clarified, contextualized, and transformed into executable instructions that can be understood and accepted by implementers. In the context of State Junior High School 4 Binjai, interpretation refers to how educators and administrators internalize and articulate the philosophical goals of character education into teaching practices, disciplinary systems, and student engagement strategies.

The interpretation process begins with the principal's role in communicating the importance of the program to the entire school community. School leaders regularly conduct meetings to disseminate the objectives, values, and technical procedures of the PPK program. Teachers subsequently act as interpreters who translate these directives into classroom activities. Each teacher integrates the values of religiosity, nationalism, independence, cooperation, and integrity into relevant learning materials and behavioral guidance that align with students' daily experiences.

For example, teachers incorporate values such as honesty, discipline, and responsibility into lesson plans, ensuring that cognitive learning is accompanied by affective and moral development. Students are encouraged to reflect on their behavior, engage in collaborative learning, and practice ethical reasoning during both classroom instruction and extracurricular activities. Through these strategies, abstract policy directives are transformed into observable practices that shape students' character.

Interpretation is also reflected in the school's evaluation mechanisms. Assessment systems are designed not only to measure academic achievement but also to monitor students' behavioral development. Teachers evaluate students' participation in learning activities, their teamwork abilities, and their adherence to school rules. These assessments provide feedback that allows teachers to monitor moral development and identify areas requiring improvement.

This interpretive process aligns with Abidin's (2002:199) argument that successful policy implementation requires a deep psychological and behavioral understanding between implementers and participants. In this context, teachers not only understand the technical aspects of the program but also demonstrate a moral commitment to shaping students' behavior. The interpretation process at State Junior High School 4 Binjai has created a shared pedagogical understanding in which teachers, students, and staff perceive character education as a collective responsibility rather than merely an administrative obligation.

Ultimately, the interpretation stage ensures that the PPK program does not remain merely a written policy but becomes understood, accepted, and internalized by the entire school community. This shared understanding provides a strong foundation for the consistent application of the program.

Application of the Character Education Strengthening Program

The third and most concrete dimension, application, refers to the stage at which the program is implemented in daily practice. According to Jones (1994) and Ponto (2016), application involves the operationalization of plans, rules, and values through structured routines and activities. At State Junior High School 4 Binjai, the application of the Character Education Strengthening Program is reflected in the integration of moral values into all aspects of school life—academic, cultural, social, and environmental.

The value of religiosity is implemented through collective prayer activities, reflection sessions, and the promotion of interfaith tolerance. Students are encouraged to respect religious diversity and understand the ethical dimensions of human behavior. These activities aim to cultivate empathy, humility, and gratitude.

The value of nationalism is expressed through ceremonial activities such as flag-raising ceremonies, national holiday commemorations, and the singing of patriotic songs. These activities foster students' sense of national pride and civic responsibility. Teachers also incorporate discussions on citizenship and historical awareness to deepen students' understanding of their role as members of a democratic society. The value of independence focuses on developing students' self-reliance and accountability. Students are encouraged to complete assignments independently, maintain classroom cleanliness, and participate in small-scale projects such as gardening or entrepreneurship activities. These practices help develop perseverance, discipline, and self-confidence.

The value of cooperation is cultivated through group-based learning, community service activities, and collaborative extracurricular programs. These activities teach students the importance of teamwork, respect for differing opinions, and collective problem-solving. Finally, the value of integrity is reinforced through literacy programs, ethical codes of

conduct, and consistent enforcement of school regulations. Students participate in reading programs, honesty-based assignments, and environmental initiatives that strengthen their sense of responsibility. The school also promotes the 5S culture-Senyum, Salam, Sapa, Sopan, Santun-to encourage daily acts of courtesy and respect within the school environment.

In addition, environmental programs such as gardening and plant-care activities form a distinctive component of the program's implementation. Students are assigned responsibility for maintaining plants over a certain period, which helps cultivate discipline, patience, and environmental awareness. These experiential learning activities demonstrate how moral education can be developed through practical and contextually meaningful experiences. Despite its overall effectiveness, several challenges remain. Differences in teacher commitment, limited funding, and occasional student indiscipline continue to pose obstacles to program implementation. Nevertheless, the overall findings indicate a noticeable improvement in students' behavioral discipline and moral awareness, suggesting that consistent program application supported by strong organizational and interpretive foundations contributes positively to character development.

Discussion

The findings indicate that the implementation of the Character Education Strengthening Program at State Junior High School 4 Binjai reflects a coherent and adaptive system consistent with Jones' model of policy implementation. The synergy among organization, interpretation, and application forms a continuous cycle in which administrative structure, pedagogical clarity, and behavioral practice reinforce one another. The organizational dimension ensures that the program operates within a stable and coordinated institutional framework. Strong leadership, structured communication channels, and adequate resource allocation emerge as critical success factors. These findings support the theoretical perspectives of Maryuni (2016) and Ponto (2016), which emphasize the importance of organizational clarity and resource management in effective program implementation.

The interpretation dimension serves as a bridge between policy and practice. The results suggest that when teachers and administrators internalize the objectives of a program, they are able to translate them into meaningful pedagogical strategies. This finding supports Abidin's (2002) argument that effective interpretation requires both cognitive understanding and emotional commitment to policy values. The application dimension confirms the effectiveness of the previous two stages. The various activities implemented-ranging from religious and cultural ceremonies to social and environmental initiatives-demonstrate how abstract values can be translated into observable behavioral practices. This finding aligns with Lickona's (2008) perspective that moral education must be practiced repeatedly and experientially in order to transform knowledge into habits and habits into character. Furthermore, the study indicates that character education should not be viewed solely as a school-based initiative but rather as a community-based effort. The involvement of parents, school committees, and community stakeholders strengthens social cohesion and contributes to the development of a supportive moral environment.

Despite the positive outcomes observed, the study also identifies several challenges, including inconsistent teacher engagement, varying levels of student motivation, and limited financial resources. These findings highlight the importance of continuous professional development, adaptive leadership, and sustainable institutional support to maintain program effectiveness.

In conclusion, the implementation of the Character Education Strengthening Program at State Junior High School 4 Binjai demonstrates that character formation is a multidimensional process that requires strong organizational structures, clear interpretive understanding, and consistent practical application. When these three dimensions operate synergistically, educational institutions can extend beyond their traditional instructional role and function as centers for moral development, producing students who are not only academically competent but also ethically grounded and socially responsible.

4. CONCLUSION

This study examined the implementation of the Character Education Strengthening Program at State Junior High School 4 Binjai using the analytical framework of organization, interpretation, and application. The findings demonstrate that the successful implementation of character education within the school depends on the dynamic interaction of organizational structure, pedagogical understanding, and consistent moral practice. The results indicate that the school's organizational structure provides a strong institutional foundation that supports the sustainability of the program. The leadership and teaching staff work collaboratively under a clear distribution of roles and responsibilities, ensuring that the program's objectives are not only formally adopted but also operationally integrated into daily school activities. This alignment between institutional management and moral objectives strengthens the school's capacity to cultivate discipline, cooperation, and a shared ethical commitment among students.

The interpretive process within the school community also plays a crucial role in translating policy directives into practical and meaningful experiences for students. Teachers act as mediators who internalize national character values-religiosity, nationalism, independence, cooperation, and integrity-and adapt them into lesson plans, classroom interactions, and extracurricular activities. This interpretive effort transforms abstract ideals into lived experiences, allowing students to understand and practice moral values through real engagement. The findings suggest that students have gradually demonstrated greater social awareness, mutual respect, and emotional maturity as outcomes of continuous character-based learning and mentoring.

The application dimension represents the concrete manifestation of these values in the daily behavior of both teachers and students. Through integrated programs that combine academic learning with extracurricular participation, the school has succeeded in embedding ethical behavior and civic responsibility within its institutional culture. The implementation of PPK at State Junior High School 4 Binjai demonstrates that character development becomes most effective when the entire educational ecosystem-administrators, teachers, students, and parents-functions cohesively toward shared moral goals. In this context, the program has evolved beyond mere policy compliance and has developed into a sustainable moral

culture that shapes both individual and collective behavior within the school environment.

However, this study also acknowledges several limitations. Since the research was conducted in a single school, the findings may not fully represent the diversity of implementation across different institutional contexts or regions. Furthermore, as a qualitative descriptive study relying primarily on interviews, observations, and document analysis, the results are interpretive and context-specific, limiting their potential for statistical generalization. Time constraints also limited the possibility of conducting longitudinal observations that could reveal long-term behavioral transformations among students. Future studies are therefore encouraged to expand the scope of research through comparative and multi-site investigations, as well as by adopting mixed-method approaches to provide more comprehensive and measurable insights into the effectiveness of character education programs.

Based on these findings, several recommendations are proposed. First, schools should strengthen organizational collaboration by aligning leadership roles, teacher responsibilities, and parental involvement in order to maintain a coherent moral framework. Second, continuous professional development for teachers is essential to enhance their capacity in value-based pedagogy and reflective teaching practices. Third, government and educational authorities should provide consistent policy guidance and resource support to ensure the sustainability of character education initiatives. Fourth, the integration of character education into all aspects of school management—from curriculum design and assessment to extracurricular and community activities—should be institutionalized to ensure long-term cultural impact. Finally, active community engagement is necessary to extend the influence of character education beyond the classroom, fostering collaboration among schools, families, and broader social institutions.

In summary, the experience of State Junior High School 4 Binjai demonstrates that the Character Education Strengthening Program can be effectively implemented when it is approached not merely as a curriculum policy but as a holistic moral system embedded within every aspect of educational life. The combination of strong organizational leadership, reflective interpretation by educators, and consistent application through student-centered activities has contributed to the development of a moral culture that aligns with the ideals of national education. Although challenges remain in ensuring sustainability and broader applicability, this study reaffirms that character education, when implemented comprehensively, has the transformative potential to shape a generation of students who are

intellectually capable, socially empathetic, and ethically responsible.

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